

How to organize a river cleanup

Stream Teams, Watershed Associations, Americorps Volunteers, citizens groups, scouts and classes organize clean ups for trash in rivers and wetlands all across Massachusetts. This popular activity produces immediate tangible results, and has high media potential and visibility. It is important that clean ups be well organized and conducted in a safe manner, especially when done with volunteers and kids.

Good organization will assure that volunteers are used effectively and safely, that the details are attended to, and that the community and general public gains awareness of the river, its condition and potential. Enthusiastic participation will provide the energy required to do the physical work of cleaning the river, as well as serve an important public information role through the volunteers.



An important part of organizing a clean up is making sure the correct people are consulted and the correct legal holes are filled.

- Conservation Commission- the town conservation commission must be notified about the cleanup as it is within the Riverfront Resource area and therefore under the jurisdiction of the Wetlands Protection Act. See the reporting form for Conservation Commissions.
- Police- Notify the police of the event and the time and place where the clean up will be taking place.
- Public notification- Notify the public and river abutters inviting them to volunteer.
- Liability- It is a good idea to have volunteers sign liability waivers. Groups should also know that landowners are not responsible for any injuries that may occur while on their property. Landowners should know that Massachusetts Law exempts landowners from most liability to people on their property as long as they do not charge a fee. (A landowner could be liable for injuries caused if he/she knowingly has a dangerous and unusual condition on his property and fails to warn people. An example could be a deep and dangerous pit dug into the ground without a warning sign.) MA General Laws (Ch 21, s. 17C, the so called recreational users liability law) was recently strengthened and expanded to cover public as well as private entities and water bodies as well as land.

Logistics

- Appoint a small working committee with a strong chairperson to coordinate the clean-up day. This committee should organize details and find people to take responsibility for different aspects of the day.
- Pick a date! Is the clean up going to be one day, or a weekend event?
- Will it be just a shoreline clean up, or will there be people in boats/canoes also?
- Obtain commitments for supplies, materials and equipment. Some local businesses provide in-kind donations of food, gloves, or bags. You may need:
 - food for refreshments, picnic
 - garbage bags
 - gloves
 - decorations along the cleanup path
 - rakes, hoes, ropes, pitchfork
- Determine the sites where clean ups will occur. Will you focus on bank trash, water debris, heavy debris or an obstruction? How much of the river will you cover, and how much of the adjacent land?
- Take note of the conditions at key sites. Do a reconnaissance to see the type of debris that will be picked up (plastic, paper, appliances, tires, etc.). Note the worst and most visible sites, and have community members provide input on prioritizing sections.
- Estimate the time and equipment needed to clean each segment. Small brooks can be cleaned by younger kids (supervised); while sections with higher flows and heavy trash or debris can be worked on by adults with equipment.
- Determine how to dispose of the waste. Many town Departments of Public Works will take trash and/or provide a dumpster if the group makes prior arrangements with them. You may need to work with a waste hauling company to have a dumpster made available for free.
- Make arrangements for return of shopping carts or disposal of tires, appliances or other waste that cannot be taken with the rest of the trash.

Getting Volunteers. No matter how well organized, no cleanup will be successful without lots of help.

- Publicize the clean up by using fliers, newspaper announcements, etc.
- Send a press release to newspapers telling them of the importance of the event and that it will be a great photo opportunity.
- Link up with other Stream Teams or watershed associations.
- Ask local youth groups and scout troops to take part. Some junior and high schools have community service organizations.

- If you are on a tidal river or estuary, contact Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management about *Coastsweeps*, a national coastal cleanup weekend in September of each year.
- Link with other national events such as National River Cleanup Week in May, or Earth Day on April 22.

During the Clean Up

- Remember that safety always comes first! Volunteers should not attempt to remove particularly large or cumbersome items or potentially hazardous materials like 50-gallon drums.
- Conduct training on safety and trash handling.
- Take photographs for follow-up publicity and future use.
- Use Riverways' Clean-Up Cards to collect some numbers on the types of trash that volunteers are finding. For example, make note of:
 - Materials that could have been recycled
 - Household hazardous waste
 - Particular items, such as tires, batteries, barrels, etc.

After the Clean Up

- Be sure to publicly thank the volunteers and coordinators.
- Thank businesses, town boards and any organization that sponsored or helped with the event.
- Keep a record of names for your mailing list, the number of volunteers, how much time they spent, and how much trash was collected.
- Follow-up to the local paper with the results of the clean-up: how much trash was collected, how many volunteers attended, etc.
- Keep a record of the number of returnable containers vs. non-returnable containers that are found during the cleanup. This information will help to support an expanded bottle bill that includes plastic water bottles and other recyclables that do not currently have a deposit for return.

